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ABSTRACT

The Language Shaping Paradigm (LSP) is designed to help improve student language and comprehension by evoking a sample of language and aiding students in a critical review of their personal patterns of language, comprehension, and thought. The basic teaching strategy is built upon having students read essays written or dictated by classmates. Each time the method is used a student's essay is treated as an important work, edited, and reproduced with accompanying exercises designed to improve reading comprehension, language usage, and creative writing. The lesson format provides several benefits: the writing samples represent the levels of interest and language sophistication of the class, students read with more interest when they know the writer, students seem to write carefully for this exercise, and those who read and edit the writing of others may benefit from social-emotional bonds. The Language Shaping Paradigm method appears to relieve certain inhibitions to language production and review and provides a purpose for writing. The LSP is especially useful with adults at the basic education level, with students in vocational training programs, with students for whom English is a second language, and for students with reading problems. (A step-by-step procedure list and sample student exercises are included.) (MKM)

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The Language Shaping Paradigm (LSP) for Improving Language, Comprehension, and Thought

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There are two nagging problems in trying to improve student language, comprehension and, in a sense, thought. One is to evoke a sufficient sample of such behavior to be able to edit or shape it. The second is to win student cooperation in the critical review of their personal patterns of language, comprehension, and thought.

A method for achieving these ends has been synthesized. The method is called the Language Shaping Paradigm. The most basic idea of the LSP is to connect students to the printed page through their own writing. More importantly, the method urges students to value and profit from their own thoughts and experiences.

In these respects, the Language Shaping Paradigm is cognate to two other methods. The traditional Language Experience Story...the LSP could be considered a post-elementary version of it; and, an idea called "RAMA -- or Read and Meet the Author" (Santensanio, 1967). The LSP is best understood, however, as a hybrid called an 'Experience with Languaging Activity'. This notion, and the emerging educational design from which it is derived, are expanded ahead, following a full development of the Language Shaping Paradigm.

Purpose and Precepts of the LSP

The basic teaching strategy, or paradigm, is built upon having students read essays written, or dictated, by classmates. Each time the method is used some essay is treated as an important work. The essay is edited and reproduced

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with accompanying exercises designed to improve reading comprehension, language usage, and creative writing.

The lesson format provides several clear benefits. For one, the themes and writing samples, by their origin, represent the levels of interest and language sophistication of the class. As such, these can serve as an effective bridge to analogous materials which might be more remote and of greater language difficulty. Second, students tend to read with more enthusiasm and better comprehension. They come to the written piece with the advantage of knowing more than they typically do about the author, the context, and often, the content. In short, they have a deeper sense of "where it all is coming from". Third, the act of writing and reading about things which are of personal concern, (or things which have been veiled slightly, though still are drawn from the core of personal experiences), provides solid opportunities for incidentally helping students to clarify thoughts and feelings, and potentially to hear alternate views of how these might be perceived. Fourth, the strategy seems to provide a strong source of motivation to students to write carefully, and to permit -- perhaps even to look forward to -- editorial corrections, due to the probability that their work might be selected to be reproduced, and, then read by others. Related to this is a fifth point of note. Those who have read and edited each others' writings, or "plunges into the unknown", (Burton, McCarthy, et.at., 1974) form intimate and durable bonds which could be called a social-emotional benefit, and consequent deep source of motivation as well.

This last point deserves elaboration for it touches upon an important consideration in instructional decision making. The consideration appears to require little more than a slight inversion of the most frequently asked question about a given piece of methodology. The typical question is, "what, (ostensibly), does this method 'do'?"

'Undoing' Inhibitions as a Release of Deep Motivation

The strength of the LSP, ironically, seems to be not in what it does, but in what it undoes. It appears to relieve certain inhibitions to language production and review, allowing deep felt incentives to surface naturally. The inhibitions, as near as I can understand these, essentially are two.

Things written in school tend to be too fleeting, causing students to feel as if they, themselves, are ephemeral: within 24-48 hours essays are written, handed in, returned and filed in some equivalent of a waste paper basket, never more to be considered. Actually, the latter point, is the second point: nothing important ever happens to what is written in school. Philosophically, there is little disagreement that a fundamental source of human motivation is the desire, in some way, to "leave one's footprint in the sands of time". This inner drama isn't apparent because it isn't pleasant to think about, and the opportunity to do something durable seems remote, especially when judged against the set-backs which can be expected when attempting to do somethings of consequence. Writing, the partial subject of this article, is a good example of where one's grand efforts can lead to a much bruised ego.

Anyone who has ever attempted to write for publication can attest to how humbling, if not humiliating, it can be to receive those first comments of reviewers and the subsequent quips of an editor. Similarly, few who have ever been published will deny that it was worthwhile. The printed word is durable, and potentially potent. Dramatic as it might seem, the world has been changed by it, and, too, it offers a small purchase on immortality. No one, not even a seemingly oblivious child, is insensitive or unaware of his mortality.

Bracing Theories

The notions state above are consistent with several bracing theories.

Most particularly with various "schema theories" (see Pearson, Hansen, et.al, 1979), spoken to written language theory (see Ruddell, 1965), and several theories of motivation (see Manzo, 1977). The strategy also is consistent with certain notions of bibliotherapy which are interpreted here, into a new set, which for need of a working name I have called 'scribe-therapy'. (The latter concept is being further explored and developed in a pilot graduate course for teachers called "Introspectives in Reading and Learning".)

These ideas, then, provide the undergirth for the LSP.

Target Population

The LSP especially is useful with persons who have failed, are failing, or otherwise feel disenfranchised. It has proven, in this regard, to be beneficial to adults at the basic education level, to students in vocational training programs, to students for whom English is a second language, and for several students with subtle reading, learning, or emotional disorders.

A sample essay with accompnay model exercises follows a step-by-step description of the LSP.

The LSP Step-by-Step

Step 1: The LSP, ideally, should begin with a provocative discussion from which a purpose to write may be generated. (The selection treated below offers a good illustration of how this might be done.)

Step 2: Depending upon the level of sophistication of the students, the teacher may either record students' oral discourse or have students write their stories or themes as they would a conventional essay.

Step 3: The teacher selects one or two essays to be edited jointly with the student, being sure the student understands that the next step will involve having the class read his work.

Step 4: The teacher, with the possible help of the student, prepares comprehension

questions on the material at a literal, interpretive, and applied level, and Language Improvement Exercises which also are hierarchical. (See illustrations.)

Step 6: The class reads the essay and completes the comprehension questions. Responses are discussed. The author is present during the discussion, though is urged to maintain a low profile to permit uninhibited interaction among class members.

Step 7: Working from the common frame of reference provided by the comprehension questions, the class turns to the Language Exercises. The author is urged to participate more openly in discussing the language exercises.

Illustration

The theme shown below is the product of one adult student who (at first) appeared to be mis-enrolled in a high school equivalency, or GED (General Education Diploma) course, as these are called. The story was generated by a discussion about dreams and their interpretation. The instructor worked individually with this student, writing his story for him as he told it. The other members of the class, who were somethat more writing-competent, attempted to write their own stories at their desks.

The instructor and student edited the theme together until it was to the student's liking. The teacher's editorial suggestions, in this case, and in all others we have experienced, were taken in good spirit. The forthcoming "publication" of the written piece seemed to offer its own justification for such straightforward editing and correcting of the more glaring grammatical and logical inconsistencies.

I Dreamed I was Green

Author: Frank xxxx, Age 31
Kansas City, Mo.

I fell asleep last night on the couch in front of my T.V. I was watching an old movie called the "Boy with the Green Hair."

My body ached from another long day. My stomach was now working on the cornbeef and cabbage, Dynamite! The combination made me dream a strange dream. I dreamed that I woke up and had turned green. God, it was so real! At first I thought it was the light. Then I thought someone was playing a practical joke on me. But none of these things made sense. The kids were fast asleep and my wife had not yet come home from her part-time job. She is a ticket girl at the Waldo.

I called the doctor. The answering service wanted to know what was wrong. I told them. He never called back. I went next door to my neighbor, Bud. He was shocked. He brought me to the hospital. His wife watched our kids.

The doctors said there is nothing wrong with you that we can tell, except that you are definitely green!

Now the dream gets all crazy. All I know is that I find myself planted in the backyard and beginning to look more and more like a tree. Then a lot of time passes. And the house is old and my wife and kids are gone, but I'm still in the backyard. No one seems to notice me. I'm not unhappy. I'm not happy. I'm nothing. I'm just there.

Well, that's not really true, about me just being there, I mean. There are moments when I'm very happy, like when squirrels

and birds are playing on my branches. And I really feel good when I turn beautiful colors in the fall. And even though I don't like the winter, it's kind of nice to be covered with blue-white snow. February is worst. Dark and sad. But then in March I begin to swell on the inside. I feel life stirring inside me, like a woman does long before anyone even knows she is pregnant. Then April showers and then in May I bust-out of myself and turn beautiful green.

I woke up at about that time. This may sound crazy, but I was a little disappointed that I was not green.

Comprehension Check

Comprehension can be checked in most any reasonable way, except with cloze passage tests. These are not conducive to discussion of meaning. Conversely, subtleties of meaning are drawn out exceedingly well by the three-level, reading-reasoning guide described by Herber (1970). A full guide on "I Dreamed I was Green" is detailed below.

Level I - Literal Comprehension

Directions: Decide whether the following statements are like those made in the story. Circle the T for True or the F for False. You may look back to the story to answer these questions. Write the number of the line(s) which helped you answer each question.

T F 1. The kids woke me from my dream by the racket that they were making. (line____)

T F 2. Thank goodness for the help of my neighbor, Fran. (line____)

T F 3. My neighbor was shocked to see that I was green. (line____)

T F 4. February is best. I love the blue-white snow. (line____)

Level II - Literal to Interpretative Comprehension

1. What was the man who wrote this article doing when he fell asleep?
2. What is the first thing this man did when he realized that he had turned green?
3. Find the line in the story which tells the kind of work the "green man's" wife does. What is the name of the place she worked it? What kind of place do you think it is?
4. What is another word for "working" in the sentence below? "My stomach was now working on the cornbeef and cabbage."
5. Why do you suppose the writer of this story dreamed that he was green?
6. Do you think that you would like to have the man who dreamed he was green as a friend? Why?
7. Did you like this man's story? What part did you like best or least?
8. Does dreaming, in your opinion, serve any useful purpose? Can it be bad for you?

Level III - Interpretative to Applied Comprehension

Consider carefully the statements below. In column A answer yes if you think the writer of the story might believe the statement of no if you think he would not. In Column B indicate which line or lines from the story helped you to decide on your answer.

A yes/no	B Line(s)	Statements
		1. I hate boiled food.
		2. A man needs friends.
		3. Doctors aren't really much good.
		4. I am nothing but a vegetable.
		5. I really don't like kids much.
		6. Nature is refreshing.
		7. Only jerks go out of their way to look different.
		8. Life has its ups and downs.
		9. Dreaming isn't good for you.
		10. I sure wish things wouldn't change as much as they do.

The recording, editing, and comprehension check treatments of a single student theme, in itself, could stand as a worthwhile lesson activity. In this case, it serves as a solid schema, or knowledge basis, for the language shaping exercises.

Language Development Exercises

The writing, or language, shaping exercises detailed below originally were fashioned to the needs of the GED class with whom I first piloted the LSP (about 10 years ago). Since that time teachers have employed the same paradigm successfully from fifth grade through high school levels.

Three hierarchical exercises are illustrated; the first two have tended to generate the most response and discussion. This may be because Levels One and Two are more specific in what is required.

It is significant that the students who could not, or would not, venture an effort on the first trial, with the level three exercises, did attempt the more difficult exercise by their very next experience with the LSP.

Language Improvement Exercises

Level I

Choosing More Appropriate Words

Sometimes replacing (or modifying) a few words in a paragraph can improve greatly the clarity and sharpness of an essay. Carefully study the paragraph below. Decide which of the underlined words you would replace from the list of words in the left column.

I <u>called</u>[1] the doctor. The answering service <u>wanted to know</u>[2] what was wrong. I told them. <u>He</u>[3] never called back. I went next door to my neighbor, Bud. He was shocked. <u>He</u>[4] <u>brought</u>[5] me to the hospital. His wife <u>watched</u>[6] our kids.

Replacement Words

spoke to
phoned
asked
the doctor
Bud
drove
looked after
told

I (1)_____the doctor. The answering service (2)_____what was wrong. I told them. (3)_____never called back. I went next door to my neighbor, Bud. He was shocked. (4)_____(5)_____ me to the hospital. His wife (6)_____ our kids.

Level II

Improving Style/Mood

"I Dreamed I was Green" is written in a half-humorist, half-serious vein. That is to say, the language is quite casual. Decide which of the sentences below best matches the mood of "I Dreamed I was Green". Underline the words, phrases and/or punctuations which seem to contribute to, or take away from that mood. Write "I" for improved, "N" for not. (Number one is done as an example.)

_____1. I called the doctor's answering service to see if I could get his opinion on why I might be green

_____2. I called the doctor. Naturally, I got some corny answering service.

_____3. I went next door to my neighbor, Bud. He was shocked.

_____4. Bud's wife, Martha, volunteered to look after the children while I was at the hospital.

_____5. You guessed it, the doctor never called back.

Level III

Rewriting or Reorganizing

Do A or B

A. Pretend that you are the author of this article and rewrite the paragraph between lines 10 and 25 in a way that you believe would improve it.

B. Reorganizing. Can you see any means by which this piece can be re-ordered so that the basic story remains the same, but the effect is more imaginative or stylish? (You may rewrite small sections, if necessary, to accomplish this.)

An Experience with Languaging Activity

In several ways the Language Shaping Paradigm epitomizes the 'third generational approach' to teaching reading at the post-elementary levels recently described by Manzo and Sherk (1978). This approach, which we have called the Languaging in the Content Areas or LICA design, advocates for an expanded version of 'concurrent methods'. Instead of attempting to improve just reading and content knowledge, the LICA design reaches out to improve, simultaneously, combinations of reading, language, content, thought, and aspects of social-emotional growth.

Activities of the type described above can be subcategorized as ELA's -- or Experience with Languaging Activities. This code name seems necessary to express the emerging realization that thought and language enrichment should be the central concerns of most lesson plans; and that the lesson activities of the secondary and post-secondary school situation need to be so oriented and organized. Too, the label "ELA's" seems to help to distinguish this notion from those implicit in its elementary school counterpart, the Language Experience Activity (or Story).

Facets of the notion of ELA's, as noted, still are emerging. Some of the differences between the ELA and LEA, however, are relatively clear. Language Experience Stories tend to be recorded and left unedited. ELA's are teacher-student edited, then, read and critiqued in a structured way by the class. Thus, in a typical LEA, language is used as a bridge to reading, and as a means to record experiences in "crude" form. ELA's begin in much the same way, however, ELA's use language as a bridge to deeper exploration and understanding of experiences, and, then, inverting, use the clarified experiences as a means to better explore and achieve precision in language.

The differences between an ELA and an LEA often appear clearest when this question is raised: "**What**, primarily, is the activity likely to promote?" If the answer is "the improvement of language so that one might learn how to read", then it probably is a traditional LEA. If the answer is that it will "promote 'progress toward reading-language-thinking and social-emotional maturity' (Manzo and Casale, 1979)", then it probably is an ELA.

It might seem odd to advocate for an ELA as a method for teaching reading to adults and youngsters who have failed to learn how to read even to a functional level. There is no paradox, however, when it is realized that failure to learn to read, where there was opportunity to do so, can only be called a dysfunction; that is, an emotional convolution of thought, rather than a disfunction, in the sense of an unlearned or slightly tarnished level of functioning.

It is in an effort to correct better such dysfunctions, or mental misfirings, that ELA's generically, and the LSP (and potentially 'scribe-therapy'), specifically are advocated for wider use, and further research and development.

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